

CLAIMS

1. A shopping assistance method, comprising the following steps carried out by a service system:
- 5 - receiving a shopping enquiry from a remote enquirer;
- obtaining the geographic location of the enquiry;
- attributing a significance to the enquiry location through a database lookup;
- carrying out a search to find an answer to the shopping enquiry using the enquiry-location significance to control the coverage of the search; and
10 - directly or indirectly returning the search results to the enquirer.
2. A method according to claim 1, wherein the enquiry-location significance is used to control the coverage of the search by being used to set one or more of the following as a search parameter:
- 15 - particular trading premises;
- a particular shopping zone;
- a predetermined geographic area for the search;
- a geographic range for the search;
- one or more geographic foci for the search.
- 20 3. A method according to claim 1, wherein the enquiry-location significance is an objective significance indicative of a functional purpose associated with the enquiry location.
- 25 4. A method according to claim 3, wherein the step of attributing a significance to the enquiry involves checking a database of traders and their locations.
5. A method according to claim 3, wherein the objective significance of the enquiry location is used to control the coverage of the search as follows, in precedence order:
- 30 - where the objective significance of the enquiry location is a trading premises, the search is at least initially made only in respect of the trading premises concerned;

- where the objective significance of the enquiry location is a shopping zone, the search is at least initially made only in respect of trading premises in the shopping zone concerned;
- otherwise, other search strategies are applied.

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6. A method according to claim 1, wherein the enquiry-location significance is a subjective significance previously attributed by the enquirer and stored in a user-profile database.
- 10 7. A method according to claim 6, wherein the subjective significance of a location comprises an indication of whether or not the location is in the enquirer's normal locality, the search being conducted accordingly such that where the enquiry location is in the enquirer's normal locality, the search coverage comprises one or more domains frequently visited by the enquirer and specified in the user-profile database.
- 15 8. A method according to claim 7, wherein said domains frequently visited by the enquirer comprise at least two of the following:
 - the enquirer's home;
 - the enquirer's work location;
- 20 - the route normally taken by the enquirer between home and work;
- the shopping zones normally visited by the enquirer.
9. A method according to claim 7, wherein said domains frequently visited by the enquirer include the shopping zones normally visited by the enquirer, these zones being
25 automatically determined from the enquirer's payment records.
10. A method according to claim 1, wherein the enquiry-location significance is a combination of:
 - an objective significance indicative of a functional purpose associated with the
30 enquiry location; and
 - a subjective significance previously attributed by the enquirer.

11. A method according to claim 10, wherein the significance of the enquiry location is used by the search subsystem to scope the search as follows, in precedence order:
- where the objective significance of the enquiry location is a trading premises, the search is at least initially made only in respect of the trading premises concerned;
 - 5 - where the objective significance of the enquiry location is a shopping zone, the search is at least initially made only in respect of trading premises in the shopping zone concerned;
 - where the subjective significance of the enquiry location is the enquirer's normal locality, the search coverage at least initially comprises one or more domains frequently visited by the enquirer,
 - 10 - otherwise, the search coverage comprises a geographic area centred on the enquiry location.
12. A method according to claim 11, wherein said domains frequently visited by the enquirer comprise at least two of the following:
- the enquirer's home;
 - the enquirer's work location;
 - the route normally taken by the enquirer between home and work;
 - the shopping zones normally visited by the enquirer.
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13. A method according to claim 11, wherein said domains frequently visited by the enquirer include the shopping zones normally visited by the enquirer, these zones being automatically determined from the enquirer's payment records.
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14. A method according to claim 10, wherein attributing an objective significance to the enquiry involves checking a database of traders and their locations and attributing a subjective significance to the enquiry involves checking a user-profile database.
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15. A method according to claim 1, wherein the enquirer specifies a degree of immediacy associated with the enquiry, this degree of immediacy being used to influence the coverage of the search.

16. A method according to claim 1, wherein the service system has a database of local traders giving contact details of their on-line database systems, the search involving consulting the database of local traders and then contacting the on-line database systems of the traders determined as being within the coverage set for the search and trading in items
5 at least of the general type relevant to the enquiry.
17. A method according to claim 1, wherein the enquiry concerns the availability of specified goods or services.
- 10 18. A method according to claim 17, wherein the enquiry includes a maximum price limit to be satisfied in respect of said goods or services.
19. A method according to claim 1, wherein the enquirer submits the enquiry using a cellular mobile radio device to pass the enquiry via a mobile radio infrastructure to the
15 service system.
20. A method according to claim 19, wherein the location of the enquiry is determined by requesting the location of the mobile radio device from a location server of the mobile radio infrastructure.
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21. A shopping-assistance service system, comprising:
- an input subsystem for receiving a shopping enquiry from a remote enquirer;
 - a location subsystem for determining the geographic location of the enquiry;
 - a database subsystem for attributing a significance to the enquiry location through a
25 database lookup;
 - a search subsystem for carrying out a search to find an answer to the shopping enquiry using the enquiry-location significance to control the coverage of the search; and
 - an output subsystem for directly or indirectly returning the search results to the
30 enquirer.

22. A system according to claim 21, wherein the enquiry-location significance determined by the database subsystem is an objective significance indicative of a functional purpose associated with the enquiry location.
- 5 23. A system according to claim 22, wherein the database subsystem comprises a database of traders and their locations, the step of attributing a significance to the enquiry involving effecting a lookup in the trader database.
- 10 24. A system according to claim 22, wherein the search subsystem is operative to use the objective significance of the enquiry location to control the coverage of the search as follows, in precedence order:
- 15 - where the objective significance of the enquiry location is a trading premises, the search is at least initially made only in respect of the trading premises concerned;
- where the objective significance of the enquiry location is a shopping zone, the search is at least initially made only in respect of trading premises in the shopping zone concerned;
- otherwise, other search strategies are applied.
- 20 25. A system according to claim 21, wherein the enquiry-location significance determined by the database subsystem is a subjective significance previously attributed by the enquirer and stored in a user-profile database of the database subsystem.
- 25 26. A system according to claim 25, wherein the subjective significance of a location comprises an indication of whether or not the location is in the enquirer's normal locality, the search subsystem being operative to conduct its search accordingly such that where the enquiry location is in the enquirer's normal locality, the search coverage comprises one or more domains frequently visited by the enquirer and specified in the user-profile database.
- 30 27. A system according to claim 25, wherein said domains frequently visited by the enquirer include the shopping zones normally visited by the enquirer, the service system further comprising an analysis subsystem for automatically determining these shopping zones from the enquirer's payment records.

28. A system according to claim 21, wherein the enquiry-location significance determined by the database subsystem is a combination of:

- 5 - an objective significance indicative of a functional purpose associated with the enquiry location; and
- a subjective significance previously attributed by the enquirer.

29. A system according to claim 28, wherein the significance of the enquiry location is used by the search subsystem to scope the search as follows, in precedence order:

- 10 - where the objective significance of the enquiry location is a trading premises, the search is at least initially made only in respect of the trading premises concerned;
- where the objective significance of the enquiry location is a shopping zone, the search is at least initially made only in respect of trading premises in the shopping zone concerned;
- 15 - where the subjective significance of the enquiry location is the enquirer's normal locality, the search coverage at least initially comprises one or more domains frequently visited by the enquirer,
- otherwise, the search coverage comprises a geographic area centred on the enquiry location.

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30. A system according to claim 28, wherein the database subsystem comprises:

- a database of traders and their locations that is used in attributing an objective significance to the enquiry, and
- a user-profile database that is used in attributing a subjective significance to the enquiry.

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31. A system according to claim 21, wherein the service system has a database of local traders giving contact details of their on-line database systems, the search subsystem being operative to consult the database of local traders and then contact the on-line database systems of the traders that are determined as being within the coverage set for the search and trading in items at least of the general type relevant to the enquiry.